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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the evolution of the alternative education program at Spingarn High School in the District of Columbia. The intent of the alternative program is to provide a variety of self-actualizing learning experiences for students through diversifying scheduling and instruction. Curricular options include majors in art, music, the humanities, and other areas. Flexible scheduling allows for students to attend classes during the day and at night. Through cooperation with a neighboring technical school, vocational education is available to Spingarn students. College preparation and remedial work in reading and other basic skills are also offered. (Author/DS)

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SCHOOLS WITH ALTERNATIVES

PRESENTED AT THE

NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF SECONDARY SCHOOL PRINCIPALS CONVENTION

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SCHOOLS WITH ALTERNATIVES

Ladies and Gentlemen, it is indeed a pleasure to be with you today to share and exchange views on Alternative Education, Alternative Programs, and schools that provide Alternatives. In that my comments are essentially a discussion of the Alternative School, I will begin by giving a definition of an Alternative School. My experiences with this area of implementation are centered around the development of Alternative strategies in a senior high school. As I see it, an Alternative high school is one that provides students with a multiplicity of ways to successfully negotiate grades ten through twelve. Further, an Alternative school is one which provides a variety of self-actualizing learning experiences for students through management and instructional diversity. Alternatives must be designed to concurrently satisfy standard system-wide criteria and Middle States Evaluation requirements.

In keeping with this concept, my presentation will be addressed specifically to my experiences with the application of alternative strategies at the Spingarn High School. This school is located in the Northeast section

section of Washington, D. C. Spingarn's student population is approximately 1,850 students. The socio-economic range extended from upper-middle income families, to poverty-level, public assistance families. The composition of the Spingarn student body provided a broad spectrum of need areas for the potential development of program options.

The Spingarn staff began its initial assessments for the development of instructional alternatives during the 1971-72 school year. A wide-range of impact areas was discerned. One of the most important constraints at that time, was over-crowding. However, with the opening of the new Woodson Senior High School in the fall of '72, the Spingarn enrollment dropped to approximately 1,200 students. The staff was then able to initiate some of its alternative programs.

Implementation began with a focus on the development of curricular majors. Options for majors in art, music, graphics, home construction, and drafting were available to students. Major programs were provided for youngsters with high interest in a particular subject area and who had demonstrated the ability to perform in an above average manner. Class periods were extended to two periods instead of the usual one period time

allotment for that particular subject. The rationale was that students would receive more intensive instruction and more vivid projection for career and employment in major areas.

Major course offerings were evaluated by the staff during the summer of 1973. Majors in art, music, and graphics proved quite beneficial to students. Assessments showed the need to eliminate the drafting major, and the need to add other courses with more appeal to students. Culinary arts was added.

In our culinary major, students were taught the many facets of the restaurant business. The course was offered through the home economics department. The program was organized so that every Thursday, students opened a mini-restaurant and cooked an entire meal. The students and faculty then purchased the meal. This was found to be very successful. We were also able to place a number of students with food service companies and restaurants in Washington, D. C. Students were able to learn and apply skills in the commercial preparation and food service industry in an actual business environment.

It was also discovered during school year 1973, that there was a distinct population of students that had to work to sustain themselves, thus, creating the problem of scheduling. Spingarn senior high school has an evening school program for young adults. When the problem arose, the possibility of interprogram scheduling was suggested. The first class at Spingarn day school begins at 9:20 a.m., and the last class ends at 3:00 p.m. The evening school program for young adults, students 16 to 21, holds classes 3:45 p.m. to 10:00 p.m. Therefore, we began to schedule youngsters over the entire day beginning at 9:20 a.m., for the first class of the day, to 10:00 p.m. It was then possible for us to develop a class schedule that best suited student needs, for example, if a student had to work at night, that student could begin classes at 11, or 12 o'clock, and continue his studies to 5:30 or 6 o'clock. This arrangement gave the student time to go home, have dinner and to get ready for his or her job.

We also noted a critical need for child-care services for student parents. There was a child-care center in Spingarn's Evening Program. We asked for an extension of the child-care program for day-school mothers.

This proposal was favorably received by the evening school facilitators, and consequently solved another problem in helping our students to continue their studies.

In school year 1974, we looked for ways to broaden our offerings and provide additional alternatives. It was found that there were a number of students entering high school with advanced credits. For example, the average student entered Spingarn with between 4½ and 5½ credits. Some students entered with advanced science, foreign language and math. These courses were taken in grades 8 and 9. Further these students wanted and were ready to continue in an accelerated program. Though most of these students planned to go on to college, many did not know what they wanted as a major. Thus, the idea of a course in Humanities was generated. The possibility of a Mini-school or a school within a school was also discussed.

The Humanities Program was designed to provide background which would prepare a youngster for college. Humanities studies did not project a major, but simply prepared the student for in-depth exploring. The program was developed around social studies, english, music and art. The idea was

to satuate the youngster with human history by periods, and to address the entire scope of that particular period. Interdisciplinary instruction included the Art of the period, the music, the writings and great thinkers of the period.

It was decided that a Mini-school or a School-within a school would be piloted with about 100 students and five selected teachers. It was proposed that these students and teachers would work together to develop strategies in individualized techniques, team teaching, open classroom, continuous progress, and to develop individualized learning materials.

In researching the possibility of becoming involved with a Mini-school and a Humanities program, it was discovered that the Woodson Senior High School had initiated both programs. That the programs had, in fact, been federally funded, and had received two grants, one from the Federal Government and one from the Foundation for the Endownment of the Arts. In this case, we decided that rather than re-invent the wheel, we would ask our sister school for assistance in organizing our programs. They, of course, responded very positively, and Spingarn became a satellite school for the Mini-school and Humanities programs. Sharing, the funding, the soft ware,

as well as staff experience with Woodson Senior High School, was the key to success.

This program was quite beneficial. Students went on educational tours to Williamsburg, to Museums located in Washington, D. C., and other interesting field trips. They found that in sharing with Woodson Senior High School, that they did have a commonality. They invited guest speakers, lecturers, and consultants to help enrich their programs. These consultants and lecturers essentially were people who had studied the periods related to their studies.

Another impact area during that period involved youngsters who had particular kinds of problems with basic skills. During the school year 1974-75, extensive testing was begun, especially in the area of reading and math. It was found that many of our youngsters were seriously lacking in those respective skills. Thus, in an effort to meet this demonstrated need, a remedial reading and mathematics program was instituted. The program consisted of math teachers teaching remedial math; english teachers teaching reading, and a thrust for all teachers to work to promote reading skills through

instruction in the content areas. We also enlisted the aid of the students in our Mini-school and Humanities programs to serve as tutors for youngsters who had difficulty in reading and math. They worked on a one-to-one basis.

The possibility of sending students to Browne Junior High School for remedial work was investigated. Browne is located in the Spingarn-Browne-Phelps Vocational High School complex, situated about 250 yards from Spingarn. Their remedial reading program was staffed by two reading specialist. It was felt that students who were especially handicapped needed the attention of a specialist. A time was arranged, usually during the English class period, when the students could go to Browne for services offered in the reading lab. This proposal was generated from staff efforts to give help to potential high school drop-outs with problems magnified by reading deficiencies. In addition, many of the students involved projected their lack of adequate reading skills in the form of poor adjustment and disciplinary problems. The primary thrust was to enhance the development of reading skills as a basic tool for achievement.

In our building organization for school year 1974-75, there was a position for a special education teacher. We elected to fill that position with a reading specialist and open our own reading lab. This gave us the opportunity to work with many more youngsters, as well as to avoid having to send students to Browne Junior High School. This particular teacher began to work with youngsters at each students individual entry level. Their reading levels were assessed, and materials developed at the students' ability level. We tried to make this both a reading and learning center, the rationale being for remedial and accelerated instructional activities, thereby eliminating the potential stigma of having a learning center for "slow-learners" or "smart students." With this procedure, we were able to reach a vast number of youngsters who had reading difficulties, and move them to the point that they could, function at the senior high school level. At the same time, high ability students were attracted to the center for advanced studies.

During our assessment of the program at the end of 1975, it was discovered that we had a number of youngsters who for some reason had a

relatively short attention span. Emotionally, these students simply could not function in the school for 6-hours a day. This became the next problem to be addressed. In an effort to do this, we tried to move to a work study program in which students took content courses at Spingarn and moved to the Pheips Vocational School to study a trade. Barbering, auto-body repair, auto-mechanics, and shoe repair were offered. We talked with the administration at Pheips Vocational High School and worked out a program that would allow us to send our students for half-day, either morning or evening. They in turn would send their students to us if we had a particular offering that they needed. Usually, the offering that they needed was a math course or perhaps physics.

We began with 25 students, male and female, who had been selected to participate in the program. They came to Spingarn in the morning, took courses in English, Math, and Science and Social Studies. The students were released at 12 noon to go to lunch, at 1 p.m., they reported to Pheips Vocational School to take their particular trade. From the shop course, students were able to move out and receive on the job training, to include

working in gas stations, working in auto-body repair shops as well as other shops.

Phelps also has a green house where they teach the intricacies of the flower business, which includes how to cut them, how to grow them, and floral arrangements. Many of our students took advantage of this program. They enjoyed being able to do something with their hands. This program was exceedingly successful. It also provided them with an avenue into certain jobs that they would have been unable to attain if they had not participated. Frequently, students were able to get jobs through contacts made by the instructor.

During the summer of 1976, we again evaluated our Alternative programs. We decided to firm up our Alternative offerings, and to set them in a standard curriculum. A distinct course dascription for each of our programs was written, and detailed explanations as to what they were designed to do, and the type of students they were designed to help. Consequently, the faculty spent 4 or 5 weeks during the summer refining curriculum offerings.

During school year 1976-77, we had a good idea of what we were

trying to accomplish in our respective courses. We were able to make some impact upon our students, to offer them some alternatives, to make for them a situation where they not only learned but,also enjoyed the experience.

It is my feeling that if we are to continue to provide quality education, we must continue to look for different avenues or alternatives. We must look at the overall student and his or her needs. We must look at our society and its needs. What is our purpose in preparing students? How can we best prepare these students? Where are the students' highest levels of interest? These things must be taken into consideration. We must design programs; we must alter programs; and we must develop schools with alternatives. Alternatives are simply different avenues, that youngsters can take to achieve the same goal. That goal is success; whether success involves going on to higher education, or going to work. The simple fact of life is that each individual is different. We must try, in our schools,to produce as much variety as possible to make school a living, learning experience, not preparation for life, but life itself.